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SUBJECT: BENIN: PRESIDENT YAYI's STATE OF THE NATION ADDRESS

¶1. SUMMARY: In his annual year-end State of the Nation address, President Yayi emphasized that the Government of Benin (GOB) has made steady progress towards prosperity and stronger democracy, despite the international economic crisis and regional threats to peace and security. Yayi underscored his government's achievements in democracy and the rule of law, governance, economic development, education, public health, security, and diplomacy. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Benin's President Yayi delivered his fourth annual State of the Nation Address at the National Assembly in Porto-Novo on December 30, 2009; National Assembly deputies, Cabinet members, and the diplomatic corps were in attendance.

Strengthening democracy and the rule of law

¶3. Yayi outlined significant GOB reforms to Benin's electoral system, especially the November 23, 2009 launch of the Extended National Census (RENA) for compiling the Permanent Digital Electoral List (LEPI) to assure transparent and fair presidential elections in ¶2011. He announced that a committee of independent experts are working to put in place a National Autonomous Electoral Committee (CENA) to manage and monitor 2011 Presidential and legislative elections. Yayi's government has implemented an integrated program to reform Benin's judicial and legal system through courthouse rehabilitation and construction (largely funded by Benin's Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact). Efforts to consolidate democratic governance include legislation to address political party funding, establishment of a national Ombudsman's office (Mediateur), and a permanent committee for facilitating relations between the government and labor unions. Yayi emphasized that his government seeks dialogue with all political constituencies and civil society to meet the challenges that Benin faces.

Building efficient government

¶4. President Yayi detailed steps his government has taken to assure modern, development-oriented administration with better management of human resources, non-partisan recruitment, and streamlined personnel procedures. In 2009 the GOB recruited 19,300 new civil servants and disbursed CFA 220 bn (USD 484.6 mn) on salaries and benefits.

Improving the economy

¶5. President Yayi blamed the international economic crisis for hindering his government's efforts to promote economic growth. Benin's economy grew 2.5 per cent in 2009, down from 5.1 per cent in ¶2008. He noted that Benin's inflation rate decreased from 7.9 per cent in 2008 to 3.2 per cent in 2009. Agricultural prices dropped

owing to increased production. Yayi also outlined successful privatizations of wood, telecom, and port enterprises. He emphasized that the partnership between Benin and the U.S. through the Millennium Challenge Corporation-funded Millennium Challenge Account/Benin (MCA/Benin) has permitted the GOB to modernize the port of Cotonou. Yayi also announced a GOB initiative to make Benin a digital hub for Africa, as well as plans for digitizing GOB administrative procedures.

Boosting agriculture

¶16. President Yayi noted that the GOB spent CFA 47 bn (USD 103.5 mn) to promote agricultural development in 2009. GOB agriculture initiatives led to increased corn and rice production. He outlined GOB government efforts to regularize land tenure through MCA/Benin's Access to Land project.

Increased employment

¶17. President Yayi noted that the GOB expended CFA 5 bn (USD 11 mn) to fund 600 business projects which provided employment and income-generating activities for youth. The GOB also provided CFA 2 bn (USD 4.4 mn) for 300 additional youth-related projects. Yayi added that the GOB provided small loans to 600,000 women for small enterprise development; this program will be extended to include up to a full million women.

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Promoting education and culture

¶18. In pursuit of broader education, in 2009 the GOB provided additional training for teachers, abolished primary and secondary education fees, built new schools, and increased teacher's wages. The GOB spent CFA 5.4 bn (USD 11.8 mn) on these initiatives. The GOB has prepared a new national policy for sport and culture, renovation of historical palaces, and participation in international cultural and sporting fora.

Improving health

¶19. Yayi listed GOB expenditures of CFA 60 bn CFA (USD 132 mn) for medical equipment and to build and rehabilitate hospitals. He also pointed to extended vaccination programs and wide efforts to prevent malaria, HIV/AIDS, and tuberculosis.

Ensuring public safety

¶10. The President detailed new measures to fight rising crime and abuse of women and children, including capacity-building programs for courts and law enforcement personnel and organizations. The GOB also undertook a public awareness campaign to fight drug trafficking and trade in counterfeit pharmaceuticals.

¶11. COMMENT: The GOB made laudable progress towards its development goals in 2009. President Yayi emphasized the U.S. role in this progress during his address, including Millennium Challenge Corporation support for economic growth, USAID's health and education efforts, and support for Benin's security forces through programs for police and military forces implemented through Department of Justice and Department of Defense programs. END COMMENT.

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